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AUTHOR Imel, Susan
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ABSTRACT

Malcolm Knowles is attributed with developing the most cogent model underlying the assumption that teaching adults should differ from teaching children and adolescents. His andragogical model is based on the premise that adult learning differs from preadult learning. Two studies have examined whether teachers do actually use a different style when teaching adults. Respondents in both studies reported they spend less time on discipline and giving directions, provide less emotional support, structure instructional activities less tightly, and vary teaching techniques more. Follow-up classroom observations in one study did not verify the self-reported differences in teaching behavior. That study did find that a nontraditional, less-formal room arrangement did lead to the use of a more student-centered approach; teachers with more formal training in adult education tended to use student-centered approaches the least; and the more flexible and responsive teachers were less experienced, female, secondary-level, and those who taught personal enrichment classes. Some considerations for practice emerged from the studies: determine the purpose of the teaching-learning situation, provide opportunities for teachers to practice learner-centered methods, and select teachers on the basis of their potential to provide learner-centered instructional settings. (YLB)

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Teaching Adults: Is It Different?

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Susan Imel

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Center on Education and Training for Employment

1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

TEACHING ADULTS: IS IT DIFFERENT?

The adult education literature generally supports the idea that teaching adults should be approached in a different way than teaching children and adolescents, groups sometimes referred to as preadults. The assumption that teachers of adults should use a style of teaching different from that used with preadults is based on "informed professional opinion; philosophical assumptions associated with humanistic psychology and progressive education; and a growing body of research and theory on adult learning, development, and socialization" (Beder and Darkenwald 1982, p. 143). Following a discussion of the major model underlying this assumption, this **ERIC Digest** examines research that investigates differences in these teaching styles and suggests considerations for practice.

The Andragogical Model

Malcolm Knowles (1980, 1984) is attributed with developing the most cogent model underlying the assumption that teaching adults should differ from teaching children and adolescents (Beder and Darkenwald 1982). By contrasting "andragogical" or learner-centered methods with "pedagogical" or teacher-centered methods, Knowles argues that adults differ from preadults in a number of important ways that affect learning and, consequently, how they approach learning. Therefore, according to Knowles, the more traditional pedagogical model is inappropriate for use with adults.

The following assumptions underlie Knowles' (1984) andragogical model:

- Adults tend to be self-directing.
- Adults have a rich reservoir of experience that can serve as a resource for learning.
- Since adults' readiness to learn is frequently affected by their need to know or do something, they tend to have a life-, task-, or problem-centered orientation to learning as contrasted to a subject-matter orientation.
- Adults are generally motivated to learn due to internal or intrinsic factors as opposed to external or extrinsic forces.

Although the assumptions underlying the andragogical model have to do with how adults learn, the model has clear implications for teaching practice: if adult learning differs from preadult learning, then it follows that adults should be taught differently (Beder and Darkenwald 1982; Feuer and Geber 1988).

Since he first proposed the model, Knowles has gradually modified his position regarding the contrast between how preadults learn (pedagogy) and how adults learn (andragogy). According to Feuer and Geber (1988), "[w]hat he once envisioned as unique characteristics of adult learners, he now sees as innate tendencies of all human beings, tendencies that emerge as people mature" (p. 33). Nevertheless, the andragogical model has strongly influenced the adult education field, with one result being the assumption teaching adults should differ from teaching children and adolescents.

What the Research Says

Although the andragogical approach to teaching adults has been widely espoused by adult educators, until recently there has been no effort to test whether teachers do actually use a different style when teaching adults. Two studies (Beder and Darkenwald 1982; Gorham 1984, 1985) examined this area by investigating the following questions: Do teachers teach adults in a different way, and if so, what are these differences? In both studies, subjects were teachers who taught both adults and preadults. In the Beder and Darkenwald study, information was collected solely through a self-report questionnaire. Gorham used an adaptation of Beder and Darkenwald's questionnaire for the initial phase of her study, followed up with classroom observations of a small number of her sample for a second phase.

In order for the instruction of adults to differ from the instruction of preadults, teachers have to perceive that there are differences in how adults learn. Both studies investigated perceptions of these learning differences and found that teachers believed adults to be significantly more intellectually curious, motivated to learn, willing to take responsibility for their learning, willing to work hard at learning, clear about what they want to learn, and concerned with the practical applications and implications of learning than were children and adolescents.

In both studies, as a result of these perceived differences in how adults and preadults learn, respondents reported significant differences in teaching styles. As compared to teaching children and adolescents, when teaching adults, they spend less time on discipline and giving directions, provide less emotional support to students, structure instructional activities less tightly, and vary their teaching techniques more. Beder and Darkenwald also found significant differences in adult classes in greater use of group discussion, more adjustment in instructional content in response to student feedback, and a greater relationship of class material to student life experiences.

The self-reported differences in teaching behavior were not verified through Gorham's (1984, 1985) follow-up classroom observations. Although she found that with preadults, teachers tended to provide more emotional support and overtly to be more directive, overall, the use of directive teacher behavior was essentially the same with both preadults and adults. In interviews, teachers "spoke

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CENTER ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
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Telephone: (614) 292-4353 or (800) 848-4815

often of the responsiveness of adult students and of the quality of discussion in adult classes . . . [but] these differences . . . did not appear to influence teachers to adopt the less directive, more student-centered approaches to teaching adults they had reported" (1985, p. 205).

The only exception to the lack of congruence between self-reported and observed behavior was in the classrooms of teachers who changed their classroom environments when teaching adults. Gorham (1984) observed that a nontraditional, less-formal room arrangement (e.g., chairs in a circle) that put the teacher in closer proximity to the students led to a "clear use of the more student-centered approach prescribed for teaching adults" (p. 79). Furthermore, Gorham noted that in her study only female teachers made such adjustments.

Additional findings related to Gorham's analysis of the classroom observations are as follows:

- Teachers with more formal training in adult education tend to use student-centered approaches the least.
- Differences among teachers, in both adult and preadult classes, are more pronounced than differences between the adult and preadult classes.
- Teachers who are the most flexible and responsive in both adult and preadult classes are in the following groups: less-experienced teachers, female teachers, teachers who taught personal enrichment adult classes, secondary teachers, or teachers reporting high teaching differences between how they taught adults and preadults.

Considerations for Practice

Is teaching adults different? Based on the literature discussed here, the answer is both yes and no. Although teachers perceive adults as being different, these perceptions do not automatically translate into differences in approaches to teaching.

Perhaps a better way to frame the question is to ask "Should teaching adults be different?" According to Darkenwald and Beder (1982), "the real issue is not whether learner-centered methods are universally applied by teachers of adults, but rather for what purposes and under what conditions such methods, and others are most appropriate and effective and in fact used by teachers" (p. 153). Gorham (1985), in citing studies that identified interaction patterns of "master" preadult teachers as being less directive and more student-centered than those of "average" preadult teachers, suggests that "the most cogent prescription might be to define responsive teaching techniques as the approved practice for educators at all levels . . ." (p. 207).

Based on these observations, some considerations for practice emerge.

1. **Determine the purpose of the teaching-learning situation.** The andragogical or learner-centered approach is not appropriate in all adult education settings (Feuer and Geber 1988). The decision about which approach to use is contextual and is based upon such things as the goals of the learners, the material to be covered, and so forth.
2. **Provide opportunities for teachers to practice learner-centered methods.** Gorham (1984) suggests training teachers in techniques especially suitable for adult students, such as small-group discussion methods, effective use of nontraditional room arrangements, and so forth.
3. **Select teachers on the basis of their potential to provide learner-centered instructional settings.** Gorham's (1984, 1985) study identified some characteristics of teachers who seemed to be more flexible and responsive in adult settings. However, she also suggests that more research is needed.

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